

IN TREMBLING HOPE

by John Muri

Like birthdays, New Years reminds us of unaccomplished goals and of the need to get about our business. Yearly, our unsatisfied wishes have to be modified in the light of age, economics, and opportunity. Here are some old wishes, modified by time for 1975:

1. Greater Effectiveness Through Cooperation. Again in 1974 we had evidences of antipathy between members of various chapters. Among several causes, one stands out. It is the domination of activities by a single individual or group that makes decisions without consulting other members. Such people offend when they carry on chapter activities to aggrandize themselves and ignore the potentialities of others. When members find little or nothing to do in a society, they usually lose interest and quit. Each of us (especially officers) needs to look at himself and ask whether what he is doing in the name of the organization is always in what might be called "the public interest."

In the maintenance and re-building of theatre organs, particularly large ones, the person in charge or with the greatest influence should ask himself: Am I competent for this job? How do I react under test conditions? Do I panic when the organ develops a run or goes dead during a concert? Do I really repair ciphers or do I just pull pipes? Do I start repairing a leather-rotten water-soaked organ by first painting the console, repairing the bird-whistle, or adjusting xylophone hammers? Such mechanics need to go study and learn from experts. Organ tinkers do about as much harm as good, maybe more.

One of the surest ways to wreck a theatre organ project is to invite large numbers of people to visit the theatre for frequent playing (usually just doodling) sessions, while no serious work is done on the organ. It doesn't take much to get a theatre manager fed up with people poking all over his theatre. With their worries about suits for accidents, damage to equipment by visitors who can't keep their hands off switchboards, projectors, etc., and

thefts, it is no wonder that some managers have little patience. Speaking of theft, Tom Sheen once said that if all the organ pipes that had been stolen were suddenly to fly back to their original instruments, the sky would be dark for three weeks. A slight exaggeration, I think, but it makes a point.

Another of our shortcomings, especially with the larger instruments, is failure to have a work-schedule with assigned responsibilities. A big workload cannot be trusted to chance or to one or two persons. Sloppy emergency repairs result in feelings of insecurity in both players and maintenance crew. A single individual will probably have to coordinate work on our largest instruments, but he will need to keep in mind that while there is always room for leadership, there is small room for domination. Supervision is important for the safety of an enterprise, but it should be exercised with tact and delegated when warranted to other workers with special competence. The big question: "Am I able to lead other people effectively?" requires an honest reply.

2. Renewal Of Courtesy, Graciousness, And Social Responsibility. I am disgusted by noisy, unruly audiences, foul-mouthed performers, and show-people who think they are too big to receive honors from their fellow-workers. A couple of years ago, the late Hal Mohr (a veteran Hollywood cameraman) exclaimed to Lois Wilson (a veteran movie star) and me concerning an Academy/Award rejection, "That guy! Who in H does he think he is? Here's our Academy, the only bit of glamor we've got left in Hollywood, offering to honor him and he spits in our faces!" I pray that the psychological streakers who expose their crudity in public (there are at least four who have reached the top in

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the movies and at least one in the theatre organ field) will cut it out in 1975. As for theatre audiences, they are long overdue for education in group manners, but there is slim hope as long as theatres keep operating restaurants, soft-drink parlors, and pin-ball arcades in their lobbies while showing inflammatory films on-screen. An organist doesn't stand much chance playing for the kinds of crowds that most theatres are attracting.

3. Sincerity In Criticism, Tempered With Kindness. In reviewing concerts, we ought to use superlatives like "artistry," "master of the instrument," "completely captivating," "enthusiastic reception," and "soul-stirring harmony" with care. The first two of these terms should be applied only by critics who have earned the right to make authoritative judgments. Amateur critics can easily make fools of themselves. My home-town newspaper once sent a musically ignorant reporter to review a symphony concert. When the paper printed stuff like "The orchestra has a good beat," "The Tannhauser March is a sparkling number," and "The orchestra showed good tempo," musically-knowing people howled in derision.

As for standing ovations as critical testimony, they have lost their validity through indiscriminate use. Everybody gets them; a stenographer got one when her boss praised her at a convention. I like Earl Wilson's crack that many a standing ovation has been caused by somebody jumping to his feet to beat the rest of the audience to the parking lot. Here again I pray for a return to temperance. We can afford to be generous in praise but not excessive, for when we praise everybody in the same way, sincerity (if not understanding) comes into question. Credibility is largely based on trust, and one has little trust in the judgments of someone whose reactions are automatic. Jesse Crawford used to say, "Never trust an orange." Even if you could learn to tell invariably which way an orange would squirt, you'd need to make sure that it didn't temporarily blind you.

4. Clear Definition Of Functions. The 1974 convention of the Theatre Historical Society met in Detroit. I noted large numbers of theatre organ followers present and their desire to have the organs played in the theatres they visited. As two organ demon-

strations were given (Royal Oak and Masonic Temple), the thought came to me that we were getting some overlap with ATOS convention functions to come a week later. The fact that next year's THS convention is to occur the same week in the same city (San Francisco) with the ATOS makes me wonder if some duplication of function might possibly be in the making. I'd like to see that clarified in 1975. Since many people are members of both fine organizations, it appears important that complementary, not duplicative, relationships be maintained.

5. **Improvement Of American Cultural Life.** The past year has given us more than enough of shocks and losses to lament. We are a humorless and entertainment-starved nation. Several important organ builders have closed up shop, with one of them going into bankruptcy. There is nothing on the scene to indicate immediate improvement. Many of the signs are negative. Our social philosophers see only serious obstacles ahead. Lewis Mumford, one of the greatest, says bluntly that we are now in a new dark age, from which it will take two or three hundred years for our descendants to emerge.

That's not so good. Well, anyway, we can be grateful for the gifts that come to us without charge year by year, dark age or bright: (1) the gift of human love and sympathy, (2) the gift of moral and ethical sense, even though it weakens occasionally, (3) the gift of memory, (4) the gift of beauty in vision and thought, (5) the gift of literacy, and (6) the gift of music, which, barring divine revelation, is as near to God's voice as we shall get on Earth. □

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